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ABSTRACT

The "Being Who You Are" model is an integrative group counseling model for adult women, particularly those who are experiencing loss of control over their lives and/or are depressed and anxious. It was developed for a population of clinically depressed women in a psychiatric hospital. To date, variations of the original model have been presented to diverse women's groups, abused, displaced and/or transitioning women, and career women exhibiting depressive symptoms and low self-esteem. The issue of self-esteem permeates many of the concerns brought to helping professionals by their clients in both individual and group settings. Yet it is often addressed only as a part of a broader issue rather than as being seen as a viable area for possible intervention in and of itself. A positive self-worth is a critical element of empowerment for women. The model employs these sessions: (1) managing change; (2) becoming aware of negative thinking; (3) discovering the meaning of worth; (4) understanding the concept of self; (5) recognizing cognitive distortions; (6) disputing the internal critic; (7) discovering one's own emotional reality; (8) beginning acceptance of self; (9) owning and appreciating accomplishments; (10) accepting and trusting positive feedback; and (11) maintaining self-esteem. (ABL)

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"Being Who You Are": The Self-Esteem Group Counseling Model For Women

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(Abbreviated version of a paper submitted for publication as "Increasing self-esteem in adult women: An integrative group model."

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The purpose of this paper is to present an integrative group counseling model for adult women, particularly those who are experiencing loss of control over their lives and/or are depressed and anxious. The issue of self-esteem permeates many of the concerns brought to helping professionals by their clients in both individual and group settings. Yet it is often addressed only as a part of a broader issue rather than as being seen as a viable area for possible intervention in and of itself. The "Being Who You Are" model recognizes the importance of personal power as a prerequisite of self-efficacy. A positive sense of self-worth is a critical element of empowerment for women.

Background of The Model

The model was developed for a population of clinically depressed women in a psychiatric hospital. It was originally intended as an adjunct therapy to complement other inpatient interventions. To date, variations of the original model have been presented to diverse women's groups, including inner-city women, aid-to-dependent children recipients; abused, displaced and/or transitioning women as well as to career women exhibiting depressive symptoms and low self-esteem. Hence, the model appears to have relevance as a practical group counseling and workshop modality aimed at addressing the unique identity needs of women who may have been excluded from the mainstream by barriers not of their own making, but who may keep themselves behind self-imposed barriers through their own sense of low self-esteem.

Studies (Enns, 1987; Golding, 1988) suggest that depression should not be considered a woman's issue but may be a function of social stratification issues and demographics, rather than gender differences. It is not the intent of this paper to focus exclusively on women's symptoms but rather to describe a therapeutic self-esteem model which can have nongender-specific applications as well.

Women who feel depressed generally report feelings of low self-esteem. Beck (1972,1976) has conceptualized depression with its accompanying sense of helplessness and hopelessness as a series of cognitive distortions, and he believes teaching new, more effective ways of thinking is essential. The model, while basically cognitive, is integrative in nature, drawing on various disciplines as relevant to the specific issue of increasing a sense of self-worth. The active, direct and educational interventions common to behavioral therapy appear to have merit. (Wolberg, 1988). Short-term dynamic therapy with its emphasis on current issues rather than on historical exploration is common to cognitive therapy as well as to various behavioral and psychodynamic therapies. Reality therapy, gestalt therapy and transactional analysis offer techniques useful in treating depression as well (Beckman & Leber, 1985).

The model attempts to address in a group setting elements critical to the individual's self concept: a sense of identity, awareness of areas of competence, and feedback in past and cur-

rent relationships and experiences. The original inpatient model conforms to the hospital requirement of a twenty-eight day cycle. Twelve one-and-a-half hour sessions over four weeks are structured to take the women from an understanding of intrinsic worth to a sense of autonomy and control. It assumes the group process dynamics of intimacy and trust among group members were concurrently developing as a result of participation in other daily ongoing groups. With other populations care should be taken to build to a stage where cohesiveness exists. A synopsis of twelve sessions follows. Commonly used interventions are described in less detail than others. Modified six and eight sessions formats can be determined on the basis of what is most appropriate for a given population.

The Model

Session One: Managing Change

Purpose: To provide the beginnings of a self-affirmation repertoire. To begin instilling a desire for action, an awareness of choice and a sense of hope.

Facilitation: An excellent beginning exercise in adapted from Sher (1979). Each client writes down a favorite color and as many adjectives as possible to describe it. Each woman reads of her list to the group. These adjectives are said to describe the person each woman is, and the potential within her. It is surprising that even when several people pick the same color the descriptions are very different. Each woman states the three most descriptive adjectives preceded by "I am ____." For exam-

ple, "I am happy. I am sunny. I am pretty." This seems to be affirming for women who are experiencing self-doubt. The counselor suggests that each woman write the sentences on paper and attach it to a mirror at home.

The counselor turns to the topic of change through a psychoeducational modality, describing change as resulting from a combination of several factors: the recognition of dissatisfaction, a clear idea of what is needed to alleviate the dissatisfaction, knowledge of the initial steps to take to effect change, and belief in one's ability to change.

Session Two: Becoming Aware of Negative Thinking

Purpose: To bring into awareness negative self-talk and to begin feeling a sense of choice and personal control.

Facilitation: The session begins by completing these sentences: I can't_____, I must_____, I should _____, I need _____, and I should have_____. The last sentence addresses the sense of guilt and blame accompanying depression. After reading their lists, the members are asked to change can't to won't, must to can, should to will, need to want, and should have to chose not to or to I could have_____but I didn't. The members read aloud and explore the original and restructured sentences. The counselor relegates these and other negative ways of thinking to the category of "garbage" and each woman is given a plain paper grocery sack upon which she write's, for example, in this manner: "Mary's Garbage." Each participant is asked to symbolically get rid of her "garbage" by throwing into the bag a piece of paper,

tissue, trash, etc. every time she catches herself engaging in negative thinking. The women are asked to keep this bag with them outside of the session. The amount of involvement is determined by the members. While no member should be forced to cooperate, most people take to this exercise readily. Reassuring the group members that the counselor will participate fully generally results in total group participation.

Sessions Three and Four: Discovering the Meaning of Worth

Purpose: To develop forgiveness and trust in self.

Facilitation: The third session begins by processing feelings about the garbage bags, which the members will carry into the fourth session. At some point members will begin expressing negative feelings about carrying the bags themselves (how cumbersome they are, how ridiculous she feels, etc.). This is a good opportunity for gaining insight that carrying around negative, destructive thoughts is similar.

The problem of human worth is explored. Each woman is asked to recall a time in her life when she felt especially good about herself. The counselor asks each member describe the event to the group. When all members have described their special moments, it is pointed out that each has already acknowledged her personal worth as evidenced by her own experience. McKay and Fanning (1987) have an excellent visualization of this sense: "Your worth is like the sun, always shining, even when you are in the shade and can't feel it. You can't keep it from shining, you can only keep yourself in the shade by letting your pathological

critic throw up clouds of confusion or by crawling under the rock of depression" (p.90). At this point each woman draws a picture of this scene to put on the mirror to remind her that her personal worth always exists.

The last way of looking at worth is described by McKay and Fanning as through the "lens of compassion." Again, there is an excellent description (p.91-92). Despite mistakes, one carries on, that "in the face of all the pain, past and to come, you continue to struggle. You plan, you cope, you decide. You continue to live and to feel" (p.91). With the acceptance that one does not have to continue paying for past mistakes comes a sense of real hope for the future. The women are asked if they are ready to dispose of their negative, destructive thinking, their old "garbage." After a simple meditation and affirmation of compassion and forgiveness, the women throw away their garbage bags in a receptacle provided. This symbolic manifestation appears to be a turning point for some. The women begin to see that their thoughts and ways of looking at outside events may, in fact, be contributing to their own sense of unhappiness.

Session Five: Understanding the Concept of Self

Purpose: To provide a basic understanding of the formation of the self-concept with its resultant sense of self-worth. To introduce the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Facilitation: The women are introduced to the concept of childhood messages and parental injunctions. They are encouraged to discuss how they view the world in terms of success and fail-

ure, to contemplate the processes through which these views developed, to explore the societal demands placed on women, and how these concepts and the expectations may contribute to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. The importance of feedback from significant others and awareness of competencies are processed. The women are asked to make a contract for all future session to own their own competence, and to give and receive appropriate feedback to and from each other. They are asked to give and receive without alibi at least one compliment to one another before the next session, with the understanding that the compliment must be sincere and truthful.

Session Six: Recognizing Cognitive Distortions

Purpose: To bring cognitive distortions into awareness.

Facilitation: The women process the preceding session's homework assignment. Many of them will not recall receiving a compliment from the other group members until they are confronted with accurate information from those who have offered the compliments. This realization sets the scene for a discussion of cognitive distortions. Having experienced graphic examples of discounting and filtering, the women give greater credibility to the probability of other distortions operating in their lives.

Session Seven: Disputing the Internal Critic

Purpose: To begin practicing control over thought processes. To gain an understanding that one chooses one's own reality.

Facilitation: The concept of the internal self-critic and the ways in which it is destructive to one's self image is intro-

duced. The group processes how their own internal critics are operating in them. With the help of the counselor they begin to learn methods of disputing and silencing the critic by formulating appropriate rebuttals. Easily accessible trade books such as Feeling Good (Burns, 1980, 1989) are recommended.

Session Eight: Discovering One's Own Emotional Reality

Purpose: To gain insight into the importance of thoughts in creating one's own emotional environment.

Facilitation: The counselor introduces the concept of reality as a myth which is filtered through one's own internal system according to individual needs, beliefs, habit patterns, etc. The group processes their differing emotional reactions to various events common to all. As an ongoing homework assignment, they are given with an affirmation of self statement to be practiced daily. Each member is to stand in front of her mirror at a special, private time and look at herself as if she has never seen this person before. When she is ready she is to say aloud, "I accept you just the way you are right now." It is not necessary that she believe the statement.

Session Nine: Beginning Acceptance of Self

Purpose: To begin self-acceptance despite one's perceived shortcomings.

Facilitation: The affirmation of self exercise is processed by the group. Gentle encouragement from the counselor without judgment or coercion is crucial to the success of this exercise. At no time should the women be made to feel they have failed if

they are unable to accomplish the entire assignment. Each step, even just an attempt to stand in front of the mirror, should be treated as a success. The processing of feelings over the next sessions, with the completion of small, successive steps toward accomplishment for those that find it difficult can be an exciting, rewarding, often cathartic experience for all participants. The joy group members express as each woman is able to affirm her own acceptance appears to be gratifying for all. Toward the end of this session, the counselor asks the women to answer the question "Who Are You?" Some will find this difficult, some will tie their identities to their roles as wives, mothers and daughters with no sense of identity as unique and separate human beings. Each woman is asked to write out by the next session the statement " I am _____" fifteen times.

Session Ten: Owning and Appreciating Accomplishments

Purpose: To develop recognition of one's uniqueness and to begin building a positive identity based on one's authentic self.

Facilitation: The women begin by processing the affirmation of self exercise then turn to reading their "I am ____" identity statements. They process feelings surrounding their statements. They are then encouraged to remember an accomplishment which they were proud of. They go back over their lives and describe the actions taken to bring the accomplishment to completion. They are encouraged to talk about their assets, special skills, and strengths in terms of themselves rather than in terms of accomplishments and expectations of family members. They begin to own

their special areas of competence and to see their worth as reflected by other group members' feedback.

Session Eleven: Accepting and Trusting Positive Feedback

Purpose: To reinforce authentic behavior through acceptance of appropriate feedback from group members.

Facilitation: Processing of the self-affirmation exercise continues. Then each woman is given an adjective checklist of approximately 200 word. Each is asked to check as many words as apply to her, then to narrow the list to the six that are most descriptive of her. The women turn these papers over and put them aside. At this point, each woman is now given one adjective that best describes her by each of the other woman in the group. As the members add their descriptive adjectives, she is asked not to commment but rather to listen openly and to write down each word on the back of the adjective checklist sheet. A sense of trust, caring and honesty allows each member to accept what she hears about herself. As each woman's feedback list is completed, she is encouraged to read it aloud to the group along with her own checklist choices. Often there are startling similarities between the two lists. Each woman begins to understand that her true best traits are apparent to those around whom she has permitted herself to be who she really is. Because this setting is often the first time many women have allowed themselves to discover who they, and to act authentically, they realize the value of "Being Who You Are." They realize that other women in the group have seen and accepted them as they "really" are. They can

now begin to take tentative steps toward generalization and integration into their everyday lives.

Session Twelve: Maintaining Self Esteem; Closure

Purpose: To reinforce how the sense of self has changed. To develop plans for applying the insights learned.

Facilitation: The session is devoted to discussion of the future in terms of each woman empowering herself through her improved self-esteem The counselor reinforces the positive changes made and offers suggestions such as reading lists and self-help and support groups which may be helpful in changing the adverse conditions under which many of the women live. A self-acceptance "graduation" ritual is useful in establishing a sense of closure. The women are invited to stand in a circle. Each in turns stands in front of every other woman and accepts this statement:"(Name), I accept you just the way you are right now." The participant is encouraged to respond with "I accept myself, too." She proceeds around the circle until every member has had a chance to affirm her acceptance. The session ends as members express their feelings, fears and hopes for themselves, each other and the future.

Conclusion

The "Being Who You Are" integrative self-esteem group model offers a system designed to address many of the issues of women experiencing maladaptive degrees of anxiety and depression. Throughout the sessions the women have become more aware of their inner locus of control. They have practiced self-acceptance and

have gained awareness that they are responsible for their own thoughts and feelings. They have learned that one's being emotionally strong and in control is dependent upon the expectations one chooses for oneself; that requiring other people's approval means placing one's self-esteem in someone else's control; and that one's unhappiness is caused by allowing other's judgments to affect one's sense of worth.

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